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Illegal Entry

It was 1947; two years after WWII had ended. My parents and only brother had emigrated to the U.S., my in-laws had joined us in Buenos Aires in September 1939, but we were looking for relatives in Vienna, Poland and Yugoslavia. We were terribly disappointed when out of twenty-seven persons, we could only locate five. Three in England, two in France and that was it. It was not only the feeling of frustration, but also the guilt feelings that we had survived and they were murdered. That feeling will never leave me.

Therefore, it was very exiting when we received a letter from Paraguay, written by a third cousin of my mother-in-law. She had escaped with her husband and two daughters from Yugoslavia and they made their way through Italy and Brazil to Paraguay. Emil had owned the largest jewelry store in Zagreb, and they survived the war hiding in the countryside helped by farmers who got rich on the jewelry he gave them. Some of the people who had money saved their lives in this way, but the poor had little chance.

Paraguay was and is an underdeveloped country and fifty years ago it was hard for Europeans to live there. When I visited Paraguay twenty-five years later, it was still a third world country. They begged us to help them to get into Argentina. Legal immigration was impossible, so we decided to bring them in illegally.

Many evenings my husband and I sat with a map, train and steamship schedules trying to find the right way. We were responsible for the safety of four people. We had ideas and discarded them. Finally, we found a way to get them across the border and then bring them to Buenos Aires where it was possible to live illegally for a while.

There is a spot where the borders of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina meet. The natural border is the Rio de la Plata. There are two bridges, one from Paraguay and the other from Brazil connecting those countries with Argentina. On Sundays people cross over and do their shopping in Argentina, as the farmers bring their wares for sale. No papers are required for the crossing; there are no border guards.

To have them cross the bridge was the first step. They had to leave all their belongings and could bring only what they could carry on their bodies. They had to pack everything else to be shipped later. We instructed them to darken their faces with make-up, wear heavy shoes, the women kerchiefs and carry a basket to blend in with the others. Once they had crossed over, we had to bring them to Buenos Aires as fast as possible, so they would not be discovered. Hans went on Saturday by train to the small town on the Argentinean side of the river and rented a room in a hotel we had found in a travelbook. Emil, Lilly and their two daughters, Slata sixteen and Dana twelve years old had to go directly to the hotel after crossing the bridge. Hans got train tickets in advance and within an hour they all were on a train to one of the port towns along the Rio de la Plata river. There they boarded a small steamship and within hours arrived in Buenos Aires. They did not need any documents on the train or ship as they were already on Argentinean territory. Our friends came in two cars to the pier and we whisked them away. It worked like clockwork.

Only after we arrived at our apartment did we embrace, hug and kiss each other. They were complete strangers to me, but at that moment, they were the closest family. We all cried, it was a release of the tension we had been under. Our friends had brought clothing and toiletries for them and we were happy to see that they fit. We did not have space in our apartment for four additional people and had rented a furnished room for them close by.

Their belongings were shipped under my name, as they had no papers to clear them through customs. As I was visibly pregnant at that time, I had no problem with customs. In Argentina a pregnant woman is a queen and gets the reverence due her.

Some years later there was an amnesty and they got their papers. Emil has since died but Lily and her daughters still live in Buenos Aires and Lilly, now ninety-one years old is the proud great grand mother of four.

